

Between Reality and Fantasy: The Case of Slavoj Žižek and Arthur Miller

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Abstract: Tolerance, equality, and universal love are all strategies that veil the reality of the relationship between the Self and the Other. Whether in the writings of Slavoj Žižek, Arthur Miller, or Jacques Lacan, the definition of "reality", as they explain, is something hidden with all sorts of false claims about the "real". The real is ugly, and reality is just an illusion that conceals the ugly truth. Each of these writers establishes that the self is living in an illusion that does not transcend the nature of itself in order to find out that the ugliness of what is really there. To Žižek, the concept of the "real" Other includes all his/her traumatic vulnerability, weakness, and imperfection. He argues in "Love Thy Neighbor, No Thanks!" that the access to the Real is possible, but threatening. By answering the question of "Who is the neighbor", Žižek refers to Lacan by stating that "the neighbor is the real". Loving the Other or the "neighbor", thus, is an experience of aggression and trauma. With the same line of thought, Arthur Miller deals with the paradox of the real in *Death of a Salesman* by portraying the life of Willy as having an illusion of himself as a successful business man that everybody respects but he's actually not that successful. Understanding Willy's background and life portrays the truth of what is the "real", for the reader understands that Willy is not what he claims to be. His "real" life is ugly, and he's just hallucinating that he's successful. This paper suggests that the concept of reality and illusion in the texts are explained by the use of dialogue which gave the characters a distinctive voice that acted as a persuasive force. I will explore how conversation is used effectively by the main characters in *Death of a Salesman* to suggest that the "real" is the "ugly". Also, I will illustrate the concept of reality vs. illusion in *Death of a Salesman* by drawing on Slavoj Žižek's "Love Thy Neighbor, No Thanks!" where he explains the "real" through the use of several examples. My aim is to acknowledge the persuasive force that lies behind the conversations illustrated by both authors in their texts, and to examine how this force is powerfully used in order to convince the reader of the reality of an object. This persuasive force was used as a key to communicate knowledge of certain concepts through certain techniques the authors used in their texts, which had an impact on the different definitions and notions.

Keywords: Rhetorical analysis, Dialogue in Rhetoric; Lacan; Žižek; Arthur Miller

There is no commandment greater than 'Love your neighbor as yourself'¹. As Slavoj Žižek analyzed Christ's words, he raised the following question: Who is the "neighbor?" He referred to Jacques Lacan's response which stated that the neighbor is the "Real". Žižek explained in his article "Love Thy Neighbor, No Thanks!", that the problem with this answer is that the "Real" is ugly and full of traumatic experiences. In order to accept the neighbor, a person should accept the concept of the "real" Other. This means that the concept of "reality" is only accurate when the "real" is known and close, otherwise it is just an illusion since the truth behind the "real" is veiled. Žižek links the concept of "reality" and the "real" by the idea of *jouissance*, the experience when reality keeps you away from the real, creating pleasure. Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* also deals with the tension between reality and the real. Willy, the protagonist, lives in a distorted medium of fantasies. He imagines himself as a successful business man, denying his real--ugly--life. The use of conversation, dialogue, repetition, rhetorical questions, and examples in Žižek's texts acted as a persuasive force in communicating knowledge about "reality", the "real", and "fantasy" that had a great effect on the idea of reality vs. illusion in *Death of a Salesman*.

In order to persuade the reader through communication, Slavoj Žižek focused on his definition of the "real", which generated other important definitions and concepts. Matthew Michael, an award-winning journalist and author, stated in his article "The Art of Persuasion and the Book of Ruth" that communication becomes ineffective, distractive, and un-persuasive when vividness characterizes "non-central" aspects rather than the "central figure."² He explained that the author who wants to persuade the audience of a certain idea should focus on the core of the idea without being interrupted by minor ideas that are not important to his explanation. Žižek focused on the central idea of his argument which is that encountering the "real" via the neighbor is threatening. From his explanation of the "real" through examples, the reader is able to understand what is meant by "reality" and "illusion". He first defined the real, and then kept on going back to his definition through examples. His definition of the "real" is stated as "one of the names of the real is thus the "ugly"...what is ugly is ultimately the brutal fact of existence (of the real) as such"(165). Thus, the two concepts, "real" and "ugly", are interrelated. The "ugly", as

¹ The Holy Bible, Mark 12:31.

² R. E. Guadagno et al., "Figural Vividness and Persuasion," p. 626.

Žižek defined it, is in object out of place, and what "makes an object "out of place" is being too close to me"(165). He emphasized these definitions later in his text as he stated that "the encounter with the real is always traumatic" (168).

Žižek included a lot of examples and repetition of the "real", which served as a rhetorical strategy for persuasion. He emphasized on the definition of the "real" as traumatic by stating that "any contact with a "real", flesh-and-blood other, any sexual pleasure that we find in touching another human being, is not something evident but inherently traumatic and can be sustained only insofar as this other enters the subject's fantasy frame"(162). His argument was consistent and persuasive because of the literary devices that were used to convince the reader. Žižek was very consistent in moving forward with his definition of the "real". Every example that he provided was either based on the one that preceded it, or was used for clarification. After his conversation about the "real" through the sexual example, he further explained the same concept through a similar example of a girl that appears beautiful. He stated that "she reveals her other side, fascinating beauty mutating into putrefied flesh with snakes and worms crawling—the disgusting substance of life" (163). In this example, not only did Žižek keep his narrative consistency, but also used emotive language as a method of persuasion. Matthew Michael explained in his article that persuasion is often achieved not" because of the content of the message per se but rather due to the communication's form and its rhetorical packaging"(151). If a message was not very true but was communicated well through rhetorical strategies such as examples, repetition, consistency, and emotive language, then it would achieve better recognition. This was the case with Žižek. Many people can disagree with his definition of the "real" but once they look at the examples and the communicative form that he used, it would be challenging to knock-down his argument.

Kamila Debowska-Kozłowska, an assistant professor of English at Adam Mickiewicz University, agrees with what Matthew Michael stated about persuasion and takes his idea one step further in her article "Processing topics from the Beneficial Cognitive Model in partially and over-successful persuasion dialogues". She focused on the Waltonian model, which emphasized that "an agent realizes his persuasive aim by trying to determine what will successfully persuade the other party by tracking the other party's commitments" (328). These "commitments" are explained as beliefs and attitudes. In relation to Žižek, his definition of the "real" challenged the

reader's beliefs. It placed the reader in an uncomfortable situation in which he was faced with the truth behind the "real" Other. Along with the rhetorical strategies, these beliefs that Žižek challenged made his argument more appealing and persuasive. The way he used dialogue to persuade others to take over his point of view was a major aspect in his text. Kozłowska also stressed on the use of dialogue as an individual aim for persuasion. She explained that dialogue and conversation helps in tracking down "the other party's commitments"(328). Žižek was having a conversation with the reader, which is evident through the use of the pronouns. For example, he stated "most of us know", "our friend", "close to me", etc. He asked rhetorical questions in his text that made the reader think of a possible answer, but then he answered these questions with further explanations and examples, which also served as a persuasion method.

Žižek's definition of the "real" paved the way for the concept of "reality" and "fantasy", which were achieved through examples and repetition. He defined "reality" as "the minimum of idealization the subject needs to be able to sustain the real" (165). Reality is when the "Real" is not "too close". It is when the subject is able to survive the presence of the Other. In order to explain his point better, Žižek kept on using almost the same examples as he used to explain the "real". He pointed out that "the gap separating beauty from ugliness is thus the very gap that separates reality from the real: What constitutes reality is the minimum of idealization the subject needs to be able to sustain the horror of the real" (163). Žižek used the phrase "sustain the real" over three times for persuasion, as Matthew Michael stated in his article that "the use of repetition is a rhetorical strategy in order to express or underscore a point of view" (152). By sustaining the "real", the subject is not traumatized. But, does that mean that "reality" is really what exists? Or, is it someplace where "real" things are hidden? Žižek explained that fantasy separates reality from the real. He defined fantasy as "what underlies the public ideological texts as its unacknowledged support, while simultaneously serving as a screen against the intrusion of the real". This separation will sustain the pleasure the subject receives. Žižek discussed his definition of "fantasy" in repetitive examples about sexual acts, integrating other examples from specific movie scenes such as *Wild at Heart* and *Short Film on Love*. One of the examples he gave was about masturbation with fantasizing. He stated masturbation arouses desire not by a "real" object but by a "fantasized object created by the subject itself" (162). Once the subject meets the "real" object, he/she will be threatened and disgusted. He highlighted this point by presenting the reader with the following two examples:

(1) In the middle of the most intense sexual act, it is possible suddenly to "disconnect." Pleasure all of a sudden can shift into disgust or into a strange feeling of distance, although nothing has changed in reality. What caused this shift was the change in the other's position with regard to our fantasmatic frame. (162)

(2) The hero, the young Tomek, practices voyeurist masturbation (he masturbates while observing the beloved woman through his "rear window"). The moment he passes the window's fantastical threshold, he is seduced by the woman on the other side of the looking glass. She offers herself to him, everything disintegrated, and he is driven to suicide. (163)

In both of these examples, pleasure can deviate to disgust when the Other becomes "too close", and "real". The subject discovers the traumatic real which takes him/her away from his/her comfort "fantasmatic" zone. Thus, the only way that the subject receives pleasure is when he/she is kept away from the "real" through the fantasy model. Jukka Mikkonen, a philosopher of literature, announced in his article "On the Body of Literary Persuasion" that "what makes a thesis put forward persuasive is certain features characteristic to literature: detailed depiction of the characters and their thoughts" (64). Through Žižek's explanation of what constitutes "reality" and "fantasy", the reader was able to understand clearly his point of view because of his detailed examples, which were previously explained in this paper. His thoughts were all consistent and well-organized in a form of a conversation with the reader, which made his ideas and examples persuasive.

To make his argument more clear and persuasive, Žižek explained how the concept of *jouissance* is essential to understand "reality" and the "real". His *jouissance* originates in Lacan's psychoanalysis. He defined *jouissance* as something that "emerges when the very reality that is the source of unpleasure, of pain, is experienced as a source of traumatic excessive pleasure" (167). *Jouissance* is transgressive in nature, for it is concerned with pleasure regardless of the pain that it might lead to. Žižek linked this notion to the idea of "reality" and the "real" by explaining how reality is ugly but the very fact that *jouissance* exists makes the situation difficult. He later explained how *jouissance* becomes "ugly" when it is "too close" since the subject would experience the "real" (167). If the subject reaches the point of complete and full *jouissance*, he/she would be traumatized because the absolute *jouissance* exists in the "real". In the previous example that Žižek gave about the young Tomek who is seduced by the woman on

the other side of the looking glass, jouissance leads him to suicide because the woman(the Object) appears as the "real" to Tomek (the subject). Thus, jouissance is evil because it involves suffering for the neighbor, which Lacan agrees with as he read Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Žižek asked rhetorical questions after his explanation of jouissance in order to persuade the reader, just like what Matthew Michael did in his analysis of the literary devices available for persuasion in the book of Ruth. Michael stated that "rhetorical questions are used in order to persuade the [reader] through appeal to their rationality" (153). Žižek posed the following question: Do we still love the [neighbor] when he or she defecates or farts? Before asking this question, Žižek explained that the main problem is the "extent to which we are ready to accept the other" (167), and after posing the question, he stated "the problem, of course, is that life itself is ugly"(167). This shows that the question was designed to have a specific purpose: to convince the reader that the neighbor is really ugly, and to lay emphasis on this point.

Drawing on Slavoj Žižek's explanation of the "real", "reality", and "fantasy", Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* suggests that the "real" is ugly by portraying the protagonist, Willy, as living in a fake reality. Willy Loman was perceived as having an illusion of himself as a successful business man that everybody respects, although he's actually not successful. Also, his sons, Biff and Happy, were successful. Willy believed that all you need to become successful is to be "well-liked", as he stated "if a man is well liked, he has a prosperous life." He failed to realize the reality of his life, that he is an ordinary salesman. As the play moves forward, Willy's inner world and external reality grow uncertain to the point that he is driven to commit suicide, for he was trying to impose his fantasies upon the reality he was living in. Mikkonen said in his article "On the Body of Literary Persuasion" that:

Roughly speaking, a literary work persuades its readers of its truths enthymematically, by implying the deliberately omitted conclusions: the unstated part of the argument is suggested by the work and filled in by the reader. Noel Carroll, for one, suggests that Miller's *Death of a Salesman* functions as a rhetorical argument (enthymeme). (62)

Arthur Miller did not implicitly state that Willy is living in an illusion; however, the play itself suggests through the dialogue with the main characters that Willy is torn between reality and illusion. His ideal self-image of being a successful business man is confused with his real self-image, the ordinary salesman.

Leah Hadomi, a professor of modern drama at the department of Literature and Theater at the University of Haifa, illustrated in her article "Fantasy and Reality: Dramatic Rhythm in Death of a Salesman" that Willy is living in an illusion. She explained how Willy's father, his older brother Ben, and old Dave Singleman are characters that "make up the ideal end of the continuum between ideality and actuality along which Willy's fluctuations between fantasy and reality take place"(159). Willy's father does not take a solid form in his mind but only enlightens his fantasies. He was spoken of only twice in the course of the play—during Ben's first "visitation" in Act One, and briefly by Willy in Howard's office in Act Two. Yet, his spirit follows Willy as he perceived him to be a successful entrepreneur. Also, Willy's brother, Ben, represents all the unique qualities that Willy wants to acquire, and symbolizes an ideal to Willy, which is closer to reality. Last, Dave Singleman, represents success that is "potentially attainable", as Hadomi stated, success of being "well-liked"(160). Along with these three characters, Willy's Son "Biff" was also depicted as torn between reality and illusion. He was distressed by the idea of personal failure, as he told his brother Happy that he " always made a point of not wasting [his] life, and every time [he] come[s] back here [he] know[s] that all [he's] done is to waste [his] life"(139). The principal characters, then, in *Death of a Salesman* are all torn between reality and illusion; they're all confused regarding their identities. With respect to these claims made by the author through the characters, Mikkonen stated in his article:

The author's implicit truth-claims may be roughly divided into those made in the work and those made by the work. *Implications in the work* can be identified with particular sentences (characters' assertions, for instance) and passages in the work (illustration, for example). (63)

Miller made truthful claims about the characters living in an illusion through the dialogue between them. This conversation was used as a means to portray certain implications that can affect the play as a whole. Without portraying the conversations between Willy and the other characters, the reader would not be able to deduce that they are living in a fantasy. Mikkonen also explained that literary persuasion prefers enthymeme because the omitted conclusion obviously follows from the premises so there is no need to state it (62). The conclusion, that they're living in a fantasy, is evident from the premises that are deduced from the dialogue, so there is no need for the author to remind the reader by the end of the play about the tense situation between reality and illusion.

Understanding Willy's background and life portrays the truth of what is the "real", for the reader understands that Willy is not what he claims to be. His "real" life is ugly, and he's just hallucinating that he's successful. Hadomi stated in her article that "as the plotting of the play progresses, Willy's fantasies gradually assert their sway over his anticipatory and active moods. This occurs in response to his frustration and failure to reinstate his control over his circumstances in the real world" (168). Willy's "real" world is how Žižek defined the "real". It was traumatic and threatening. He didn't want to face the fact that he's an ordinary salesman; rather, he wanted to live in a fantasy, which served as a screen against the intrusion of the real. Žižek explained how the subject is threatened when he/she approaches reality because the "real" is ugly, as he stated "the kernel of reality is horror—horror of the real" (165). The subject does not want to face his/her real "self-image". The same case applies to Willy. By the end of the play, when Willy faced reality and became too close to it, he was driven to kill himself.

Jouissance, in Willy's case, seems to sustain his fantasies and give him pleasure. Žižek explained that "jouissance emerges when the very reality that is the source of unpleasure, of pain, is experienced as a source of traumatic excess pleasure" (167). Willy was gaining pleasure from his reality because "reality" for him was hiding the "real". It was covered with his fantasies. As explained before, if the subject reaches the point of complete and full jouissance, he/she would be traumatized because the absolute jouissance exists in the "real". Willy became traumatized by the end of the play because he experienced this absolute jouissance, which gave him access to his real--ugly--life.

When Arthur Miller tried to persuade the reader that Willy was living in an illusion, he employed several techniques that made his discourse more convincing. Particularly notable in the dialogue between Willy and his family is the use of repetition and emotive language, in which Michael Matthew also stressed on in his analysis of the persuasion methods in the Book of Ruth. There was a lot of repetition of several statements that illustrate Willy's condition. For example, Willy had a lot of conversations in which he wanted to appear like he's someone important, as he stated "Someday I'll have my own business, and I'll never have to leave home any more. And they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own". Through the conversations he had with his sons and wife, the reader is persuaded that Willy is trying to be

something he is not. Also, Miller persuaded the reader of Willy's condition through his son, Biff. Willy believed that Biff will be a successful boy since he was "well-liked" in high school, as he told him "Because you got greatness in you, Biff, remember that. You got all kinds of greatness". We later know that Biff failed math in high school and then worked on a farm. When Biff returned home, Willy still believed that Biff is successful, for he said "Well, he's been doing very big things in the West. But he decided to establish himself here". Later, Biff confronts his father that both of them are not successful by saying "I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ash can like all the rest of them". Thus, the author, Arthur Miller, convinced the reader that Willy was not living in reality by illustrating Willy's condition and personality through conversations he had with other people and with his son, Biff.

"Reality" for Slavoj Žižek and Arthur Miller is something hidden within all sorts of false claims about the "real". Both authors establish in their writings that the subject is living in an illusion, which drives them away from the "real". Žižek argues in "Love Thy Neighbor, No Thanks!" that access to the Real is possible, but threatening, and Miller argues that Willy is living in an illusion because his "real" life is ugly. Both of these authors use dialogue and conversation with the characters and audience as a base for establishing their argument, along with repetition, rhetorical questions, and emotive language for persuasion.

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